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Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in the Central African Republic and the activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to the request of the Security Council contained in the statement issued by its President on 26 September 2001 (S/PRST/2001/25), in which the Council requested me to continue to keep it regularly informed of the situation in the Central African Republic and the activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in that country (BONUCA). The report covers the period from January to June 2007 and describes the situation in its political, socio-economic, humanitarian, security and human rights aspects.

II. Political situation

2. Since my last report, dated 28 December 2006 (S/2006/1034), the political situation has been marked by preparations for an inclusive political dialogue necessitated by a persistent political crisis and rebel activities, especially in the north-western and north-eastern parts of the country. In order to find lasting solutions to the crisis, a number of activities were carried out by various national and international actors.

3. Most notably, the Panel of the Wise, a prominent civil society group, conducted a series of consultations with national political parties, trade unions, civil society organizations and members of the diplomatic community accredited in the country. Most of the stakeholders stressed the need to hold an inclusive political dialogue involving a broad segment of the country's society, as well as the rebel movements that have recently resorted to armed activities against the Government.

4. Subsequently, the Panel of the Wise, having been mandated by President François Bozizé also to consult rebel groups, met with some rebel leaders abroad. It also met with former President Ange-Félix Patassé, who lives in exile since having been overthrown by President Bozizé in March 2003. In March 2007, the Panel presented to President Bozizé its report containing recommendations on holding an inclusive political dialogue. President Bozizé forwarded the report to the National Assembly and the Constitutional Court to seek their views on the document. The

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report was also circulated to the diplomatic community in the capital, Bangui, and to political parties and members of civil society. As at 11 June, only political parties had commented on the document, while the Constitutional Court and the National Assembly had provided no formal feedback.

5. Among its main conclusions and recommendations, the Panel of the Wise proposed to hold the national dialogue in three stages: (a) preliminary consultations focusing on military and security aspects; (b) preliminary consultations among representatives of all the political parties and civil society organizations to define the content and procedures of the eventual inclusive national dialogue; and (c) an inclusive political conference bringing together all stakeholders and facilitated by an external mediator.

6. With regard to the military dialogue, a number of meetings aimed at reaching a ceasefire throughout the country were held with rebel movements. In that context, the signature of the Syrte agreement on 2 February 2007 between the Government of the Central African Republic and Abdoulaye Miskine, leader of the Front démocratique pour le peuple centrafricain (FDPC), and the signature of the Birao agreement between the Government and Zakaria Damane, chief of operations of the Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement (UFDR), constitute important preliminary steps in the dialogue process. The Government is trying to reach similar peace agreements with other rebel leaders.

7. President Bozizé continues to express his support for the holding of the inclusive political dialogue, on condition that the security situation in the country improve and that the dialogue not call into question the legitimacy of institutions set up following the legislative and presidential elections in 2005.

8. Meanwhile, leaders of opposition parties who are members of the Union des forces vives de la nation (UFVN) remain doubtful of the Government's commitment to hold the dialogue. They view the signature of the Syrte and Birao agreements with rebel groups as a dilatory manoeuvre resorted to by President Bozizé to either bypass the dialogue or postpone it as long as possible. Those leaders have denounced the delay in proceeding with the organization of the dialogue and demanded that the authorities agree to a clear plan and timeline for the conference.

9. On 18 May 2007, President Bozizé held a meeting with UFVN representatives, during which he reaffirmed his determination to hold the dialogue conference. He explained that he intended to reach preliminary agreements on the cessation of hostilities in all parts of the country before proceeding with the organization of such a dialogue. The President's arguments for delaying the dialogue have continued to be met with scepticism by opposition parties as a whole.

10. During the reporting period, BONUCA organized a number of training programmes in cooperation with national authorities, aimed primarily at revitalizing civic processes in the country. From 8 to 17 March 2007, the Office conducted training for traditional and community leaders and civil society groups to explore ways to resolve and mediate conflicts through dialogue in the town of Markounda, in Ouham prefecture.

11. In my report dated 23 February 2007 (S/2007/97), I recommended the deployment of a United Nations multidimensional presence along the borders of Chad and the Central African Republic with the Sudan to prevent further spillover of the Darfur crisis. Although the Chadian Government agreed in principle to a

deployment, it expressed a clear preference for further discussion of my proposals. On that basis I dispatched a delegation to Chad and the Central African Republic on 21 May for discussions with both Governments on the proposed United Nations operation. I will be submitting a report on the results of the delegation's visit in the coming weeks.

III. Military and security situation

12. The security situation has become more volatile as a result of the increased activities of highway bandits and rebel movements in various parts of the country. Bangui continued to suffer from frequent, almost daily residential break-ins.

13. As had occurred in October 2006, the UFDR rebel movement captured two towns in the north-eastern part of the country on 3 and 4 March 2007. The two towns were immediately recaptured by Government forces, supported by the Multinational Force of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community and French forces. Following the signature of the Birao ceasefire agreement between Government and rebel forces on 13 April 2007, relative calm was observed in the area. That calm was disrupted in May by the arrival in the town of Sam Ouandja of approximately 3,000 Sudanese nationals who sought refuge there after fleeing what they described as heavy fighting in the Darfur region of the Sudan.

14. In the north-western part of the country, the security situation has significantly deteriorated. New armed attacks by rebel fighters belonging to the Armée populaire pour la restauration de la démocratie (APRD) and by criminal gangs continue to be reported. On 19 May 2007, highway robbers held hostage two humanitarian workers from Caritas and Cooperazione Internazionale. On 26 May, an unidentified armed group attacked a BONUCA convoy that was returning from a mission in the town of Bambari. On 11 June, a French humanitarian worker of the Médecins sans frontières humanitarian agency was killed by members of the APRD rebel movement, who stated that their attack had occurred mistakenly and unintentionally. My Special Representative and the United Nations Resident Coordinator in the Central African Republic have strongly condemned those attacks and have requested the Government to reinforce the security of humanitarian workers and all United Nations staff in the Central African Republic, who provide much-needed assistance to the people in the country.

15. It should be noted that retaliatory actions by Government forces are often disproportionate in the areas where rebels and other armed groups conduct their activities. Assuming that the local civilian population supports rebels, Government forces have sometimes resorted to destroying, torching and pillaging houses and committing physical violence against innocent civilians. The combination of acts of violence perpetrated by rebels, bandits and Government forces frequently leads to the displacement of the civilian communities, and civilians then seek refuge either in the bush and the fields or in neighbouring Cameroon and Chad. As a result, the humanitarian situation in the country has significantly deteriorated, with nearly a quarter of the entire population of about 4 million said to be affected.

16. The security situation is also compounded by other forms of violence, including inter-communal violence, which often translates into fighting between cattle-raisers and farmers or fighting for religious reasons. Furthermore, the porosity of the international borders of the Central African Republic facilitates transboundary

criminality, the proliferation of illicit light weapons and incursions by armed groups. The situation is exacerbated by the ongoing conflicts in Darfur and eastern Chad.

17. BONUCA and the Government of France continue to support the programme of restructuring the country's armed forces. During the reporting period, BONUCA, in cooperation with France, trained a number of army, gendarmerie and police officers on the role of the national defence and security services in a modern, democratic society. The project on the reintegration of ex-combatants and support for communities, implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), under the auspices of the national commission set up to fight against the proliferation of light weapons and to promote disarmament and reintegration, was completed in February 2007. The project has succeeded in demobilizing 7,556 ex-combatants and implementing up to 50 communal microprojects to help them reintegrate into peaceful civilian life.

18. Given the gravity of the threat posed by the continuing proliferation of small arms and light weapons, two new projects to support communities in controlling and reducing the circulation of such weapons were recently launched. Developed with the support of the Governments of France and Japan, the projects would require funding of up to $2 million each. A coordination group on security sector reform has also been launched and a national workshop on security sector reform is tentatively scheduled for September 2007.

IV. Socio-economic and financial situation

19. The economy of the Central African Republic has seen relative improvement in 2007, compared to previous years. The growth rate in 2007 has reached 4.7 per cent, compared to 3.8 per cent in 2006. The current economic growth results from the revitalization of the tertiary and secondary sectors and increased investment in infrastructure. If this encouraging trend continues, the decline in per capital income observed in the country since the 1980s could be significantly reversed. The continuing increase in inflation, due in large part to rising oil prices, could, however, dampen the recent growth rate.

20. Public finances also improved, with the launch, in December 2006, of reforms in financial control mechanisms within the framework of the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Development Policy Operation facility of the World Bank. The State's revenues decreased in the first trimester of 2007, reaching only 90 per cent of the projected figures. The overall revenue estimates for 2007 currently amount to 85 billion CFA francs, compared to 73 billion in 2006. Nevertheless, in the area of public expenditures, the country has continued to face difficulties in respecting the planned limits on expenditures, as was observed by the IMF mission in May 2007. The Government is also confronted with persistent difficulties in meeting its basic financial obligations, such as paying salaries, financing its basic functions and investing in the vital mining sector.

21. By the end of 2006, international financial assistance received by the Central African Republic considerably exceeded that of previous years, reaching 73 billion CFA francs. However, most of the aid was used to cover the country's international debt-servicing arrears in order to renew cooperation with international financial

institutions. The renewal of such cooperation could increase the volume of international aid in 2007. In that context, the European Union supported the country's efforts to pay its internal arrears and rehabilitate public finances. The European Union also intends to support territorial administration reform through the creation of local economic centres in order to decentralize the economy.

22. The planned organization of round-table consultations between the authorities of the Central African Republic and international donors in 2007 could result in the cancellation of the county's external debts and attract additional resources for financing national reconstruction efforts. It is also expected that the country's overall financial prospects could brighten even further with future debt relief, should the country be deemed eligible to benefit from the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative.

V. Humanitarian situation and operational activities for development

23. The overall humanitarian conditions have substantially deteriorated since the beginning of the year because of increasing insecurity, mostly in the northern parts of the country. With an estimated 1 million nationals affected by the conflict, the number of internally displaced persons requiring emergency assistance is said to have reached over 200,000. The local mechanism for rapid funding of humanitarian needs, the Emergency Response Fund, has received contributions of approximately $2 million from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Sweden. The United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund has also allocated $4 million for 2007.

24. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) intensified its activities for the protection of internally displaced persons by distributing emergency supplies and by training defence and security forces on principles of internal displacement, respect for human rights and international humanitarian law. UNHCR also completed the voluntary repatriation of 9,692 refugees from Southern Sudan and intends to start repatriating 875 refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

25. In terms of overall operational development activities, various entities of the United Nations system started the implementation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework for the period 2007-2011. Their activities are concentrated in three major areas: (a) reinforcement of democratic governance and respect for human rights; (b) post-conflict revival and fighting against poverty; and (c) fighting against the spread of HIV/AIDS.

26. The World Food Programme (WFP) has distributed 5,737 metric tons of food supplies in the northern parts of the country affected by violence. It has continued to operate school feeding programmes for 100,000 children in six prefectures and has provided food supplies for 34,000 individuals affected by HIV/AIDS and another 80,000 individuals affected by the ongoing conflict. WFP has also made its aircraft and 10 trucks available for humanitarian workers from other aid organizations to facilitate their access to remote areas of the country. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has distributed seeds and agricultural tools to 44,000 families, comprising up to 220,000 individuals, in northern parts of the

country. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) concluded a $13.5 million plan of action with the Government for the period 2007-2011.

27. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have organized joint vaccination and anti-malaria campaigns for 96,989 children up to five years of age and 6,765 pregnant women in six provinces affected by conflict. During the campaign, WHO and UNICEF also vaccinated 525 infants up to one year of age against measles. WHO has further assisted the Government in organizing a vaccination campaign against yellow fever and in mapping health services provision in the country.

28. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization continued its activities in the areas of reconstruction of the country's education system, promotion of women's literacy, civic and peace education, culture of communication, prevention of HIV/AIDS in academic circles, protection of the cultural identity of disadvantaged ethnic communities and facilitation of their access to primary education.

29. With financial and technical assistance from WHO and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), UNHCR has carried out an HIV/AIDS sensitization and voluntary detection campaign among refugees, with a view to providing care to affected refugees. In March 2007, the results of the first national HIV survey, carried out with the assistance of UNFPA, were published. On the basis of the results, the United Nations country team intends to develop, with the assistance of UNAIDS, a country action plan.

VI. Human rights situation

30. The human rights situation has significantly deteriorated over the past six months, both in the capital and in the countryside, in particular in the provinces of Ouham, Ouham-Pendé, Vakaga and Nana-Grébizi.

31. In February 2007, during a police operation to capture suspects who allegedly disobeyed a Government decree targeting mostly Muslim shop owners in one of the densely populated quarters of Bangui, four people died and a number of residents were injured. The police reaction was condemned not only by national non-governmental organizations but also by the Minister of Interior, who initiated an investigation.

32. In the countryside, grave human rights violations are generally attributed to the prevailing climate of insecurity. Violations are often committed by highway robbers, rebel forces and the national armed forces. After rebel attacks, national security forces frequently carry out reprisal actions, during which indiscriminate acts of mistreatment of the local civilian population occur.

33. Despite the Government's ratification of international legal instruments protecting human and humanitarian rights, gross violations of those rights continue to be reported in the country, even though BONUCA has often drawn the attention of the authorities to their obligations under those international instruments.

34. During the reporting period, BONUCA participated in the assessment missions carried out by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations country team in different parts of the country.

BONUCA also assisted the Government in drafting the country's labour code, carried out sensitization activities through mass media and organized training sessions on human rights for law enforcement agents in the town of Bambari, in Ouaka province.

35. In partnership with national and international non-governmental organizations, UNICEF set up local and regional networks for the protection of children, as well as for monitoring and reporting cases of human rights violations in Ouham and Nana-Grébizi prefectures. At the same time, programmes for disarmament, demobilization and rehabilitation of child soldiers, provided for under the peace agreement signed between the Government and the UFDR rebel group, have also been initiated. Up to 400 child soldiers have already been identified to benefit from the programmes. UNDP has started the implementation of a project on legal security, financed by the Government of France. In the social and cultural fields, the first Bangui International Human Rights Film Festival, sponsored by the European Union, UNDP and the International Organization of la Francophonie, was held from 18 to 23 May 2007.

VII. Observations

36. The overall political, security and socio-economic situation in the Central African Republic remains precarious. The volatile climate is aggravated by repeated violations of human rights and deteriorating humanitarian conditions. The causes of the ongoing crisis lie in four intertwined areas: (a) the absence of a culture of dialogue and tolerance; (b) repeated human rights violations; (c) impunity; and (d) an unfavourable social environment caused by widespread poverty, corruption, irregular salary payments and an accumulation of salary arrears.

37. I strongly encourage the authorities of the Central African Republic to intensify their efforts to move the peace process forward by organizing without further delay an inclusive political dialogue. The United Nations stands ready to support the process. While I welcome recent peace agreements signed by the Government and a number of armed rebel groups, I remain convinced that only through a comprehensive and inclusive dialogue can solid progress towards restoring sustainable stability in the country and attracting investors be made.

38. I strongly condemn the repeated attacks on humanitarian workers, including staff members of the United Nations system, in the Central African Republic. I call on the Government to take the necessary measures to bring those responsible for perpetrating such incidents to justice and to ensure adequate protection for staff who provide essential relief assistance to the people of the Central African Republic, often under extremely challenging conditions.

39. I also welcome the decision of the Heads of State of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community to extend the mandate of its Multinational Force in the Central African Republic (FOMUC) for an additional six-month period, until 31 December 2007. I again commend the African Union and the European Union for their important political and financial support for FOMUC, and appeal to them and to the international community as a whole for continued and increased support to enable FOMUC to expand its security assistance projects throughout the country.

40. Recent encouraging prospects can be sustained only with continued international cooperation, in a climate of peace. The United Nations community will continue to support the Government and the people of the Central African Republic for the achievement of lasting peace and to mobilize international aid. However, the primary responsibility for improving conditions in the country rests with the Government and the people as a whole.

41. In conclusion, I would like to express gratitude to regional States and organizations, as well as other States and institutions, for their continued support for the Government of the Central African Republic, especially in the financial and security sectors. I would also like to commend my Special Representative in the Central African Republic, General Lamine Cissé, his staff, and other members of the United Nations country team as a whole, for their professionalism and dedication in fulfilling their vital duties, often, in dangerous conditions.